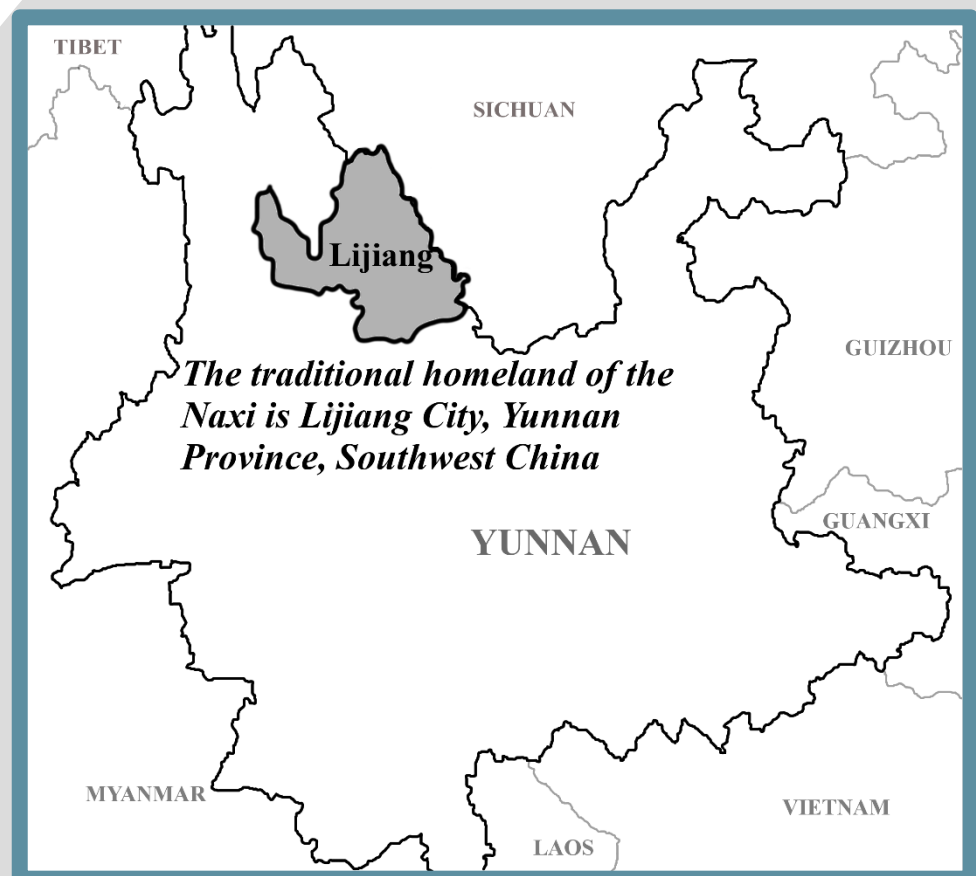


Insider perspectives on indigenous social media and language/culture maintenance: A case study of WeChat use among the Naxi of China

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The Naxi of China



Co-authors Qinglian Zhao & Zhili He, on right

- **Population:** 326,000 (2010 census)
- **Language family:** Tibeto-Burman, Naic (Jacques & Michaud 2011)
- **Language vitality:** Threatened/Vulnerable (Zhao 2012)
- **FAMED conditions** (Lewis & Simons 2015):
 - Functions: daily life in informal domains
 - Acquisition: oral transmission in home and community
 - Motivation: strong perceived benefit for oral use, less so for written
 - Environment: affirms oral use, but limited investment in written
 - Differentiation: use of Mandarin creeping into informal domains

Do Naxi perceive ethnic social media as supporting their language/culture maintenance?

(Carlson 2013; Kral 2014; Galla 2018; Jany 2018; Wagner 2017)

Conclusion

Summary of results:

- Naxi create and participate in Naxi WeChat groups because **they want a vibrant, sustainable, Naxi-speaking community**
- WeChat groups are perceived as **supporting current levels** of oral language functions, acquisition, motivation and environment
- **Not** widely perceived as encouraging Naxi **literacy**
- **Concern** about decreasing use of Naxi as groups grow larger

Further questions:

- What is the relationship between users' perceptions of WeChat groups and their actual behavior?
- How can the Naxi encourage Naxi use in their groups?



At an event celebrating 60 years of Naxi pinyin

Naxi WeChat groups



- WeChat is a free **social media platform** first introduced in 2011
- **Popular in China:** 90% of smartphone users
- **WeChat groups:**
 - Similar to invitation-only forum
 - Built by a single moderator
 - No anonymous members
 - Limited to 500 users
 - **Sound, text, and symbol messaging**
- **Naxi WeChat groups:**
 - Language/culture interest groups
 - Village groups
 - Family, friends, co-workers, parents, etc.



Research questions

Q1: How do users describe their investment in the groups, the functions of the groups, and the value of being part of the groups?

Q2: What role, if any, do members perceive the Naxi WeChat groups playing in Naxi language/culture maintenance?

Q3: What challenges and tensions do they identify in using the groups to reach their goals?

Methodology

Online survey: n=93

- Procedure and sample:
 - 38 questions (in Chinese), anonymous online survey
 - Respondents: 64 language/culture, 26 village, 3 moderators
- Questions:
 - Q1: closed questions on Naxi use, attitudes, group purpose, topics, modes (Naxi recording, Chinese written, Naxi written)
 - Q2: Respondents evaluate WeChat group's support for each FAMED condition, using 1-5 Likert scales

Semi-structured interviews: n=10

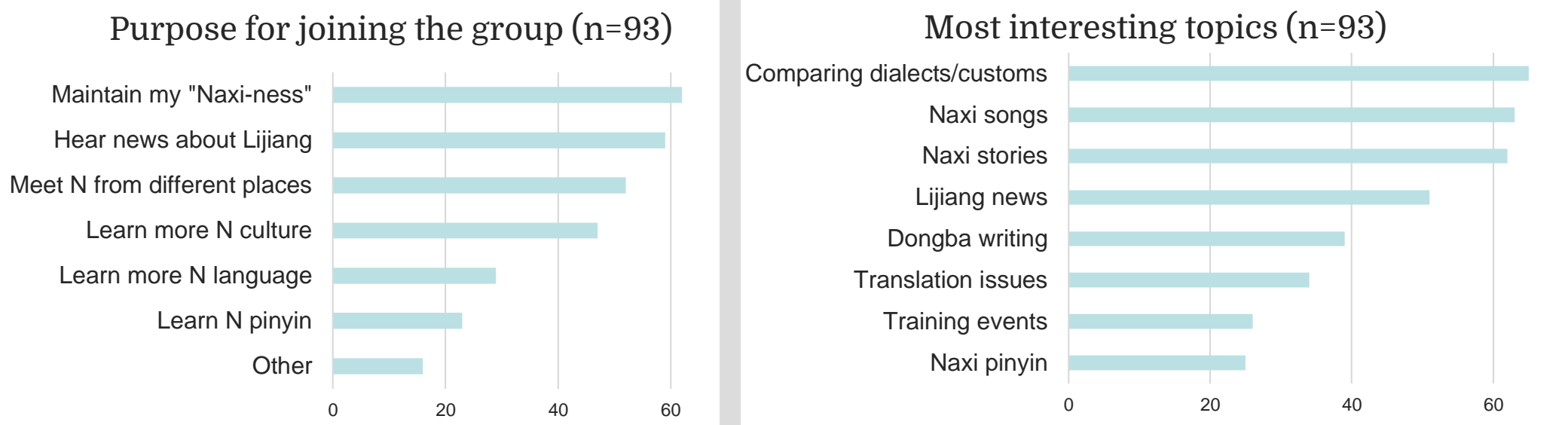
- Procedure, sample, questions:
 - Conducted in Naxi, translated into Chinese
 - 7 language/culture interest group members, 3 village group members
 - Q1, Q2, Q3: Open-ended questions
 - 11,000 words
- Analysis:
 - **"Imagined communities"** (Norton 2000): what kind of community the respondents aspire to join/create



Traditional community dance

Results

Q1: Investment, functions, value of WeChat groups:



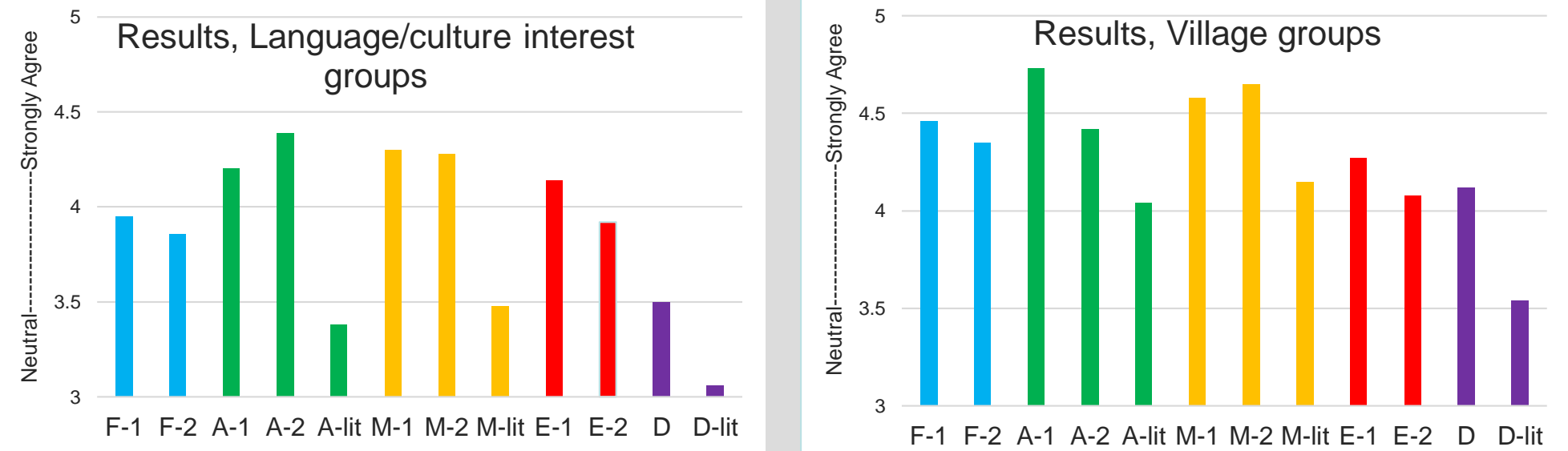
"... Work together to better protect our ethnic culture!" ^{S1Q2SR37}

"... To increase contact between members." ^{V1Q18A}

"... To enrich my life and gain more knowledge." ^{V1Q18C}

Q2: Perceived WeChat support for FAMED conditions:

FAMED=Functions, Acquisition, Motivation, Environment, Differentiation
F-1: I have more opportunities to use N. F-2: I share songs/stories that I learn on WeChat in my daily life.
A-1: helps young people to learn more N. A-2: I feel more strongly that parents should use N with children.
A-literacy: helps N learn N pinyin. M-literacy: encourages N to learn N pinyin.
M-1: helps N diaspora stay in touch with homeland. M-2: I feel more strongly that children should learn N.
E-1: helps non-N to understand N culture. E-2: helps government form better N language policy.
D: there are topics we only use N recordings for. D-literacy: there are topics we only use N pinyin for.



Q3: Challenges and tensions:

Tension between welcoming less proficient members and carving out Naxi-only space

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